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This listing of the claims replaces all prior versions in the application.

Listing of Claims:

1. (Currently Amended) A packing mechanism for arranging suspended elongated product on a carrier member, comprising:

an elongated packing arm having an associated length and opposing first and second end portions, said first end portion comprising a contact being attached to a fork member that has spaced apart first and second fingers, wherein, in operation, the fork contact member is adapted to periodically contact a portion of a suspended elongated item held on a carrier member to cause adjacent portions of the suspended elongated item to move closer together on the carrier member; and

a drive mechanism attached to the second end portion of the packing arm and configured to repeatedly move the packing arm in a predetermined motion so that the contact fork member serially moves in a cycle that includes moving in a first longitudinal direction, descending a desired vertical distance sufficient to cause the fork contact member to engage with the carrier member, moving in a second longitudinal direction opposite the first longitudinal direction with the fork contact member substantially horizontal and parallel to the orientation of the carrier member, then rising a distance to reside above the carrier member.

2. (Currently Amended) A packing mechanism according to Claim 1, wherein the drive mechanism comprises a mechanical linkage with a rotating wheel, and wherein, in operation, rotation of the wheel causes the linkage to direct the packing arm to travel in the predetermined motion, and wherein the contact member fingers are configured to push suspended segments of the elongated item closer together on the carrier member with a generally horizontal longitudinal stroke.

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3. (Original) A packing mechanism according to Claim 2, wherein the drive mechanism is configured to cause the arm to stall for an interval of time between the rearward and forward travel.
4. (Original) A packing mechanism according to Claim 2, wherein, in operation, the drive mechanism comprises a motor that drives the rotating wheel.
5. (Original) A packing mechanism according to Claim 1, in combination with the carrier member and lengths of one or more elongated items so that the one or more elongated items are suspended in a straddled looped or non-looped configuration.
6. (Original) A packing mechanism according to Claim 5, wherein, in operation, the carrier member travels in a unidirectional travel path located below the packing arm as the packing mechanism repeatedly travels through its movement cycle.
7. (Original) A packing mechanism according to Claim 5, wherein the elongated item is an extruded or stuffed product held in a casing.
8. (Original) A packing mechanism according to Claim 7, wherein the elongated item is a meat product.
9. (Original) A packing mechanism according to Claim 5, wherein the elongated item is a continuous length of portioned or linked meat.
10. (Original) A packing mechanism according to Claim 8, wherein the elongated meat product is a continuous length of non-linked meat.
11. (Original) A packing mechanism according to Claim 5, wherein the carrier member is a rod having a length of at least about six feet.

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12. (Original) A packing mechanism according to Claim 1, wherein the packing mechanism defines a portion of a food processing facility.

13. (Currently Amended) A packing mechanism according to Claim 5, wherein, in operation, the packing arm travels a first selected path, the path being two or three dimensional in direction to cause the fingers to straddle the carrier member, and the carrier member is cooperably aligned with and below the packing arm, and wherein the carrier member travels in a second open unidirectional path.

14. (Original) A packing mechanism according to Claim 5, further comprising a stationary platform that supports a portion of the drive mechanism, the platform including first and second laterally extending mounting brackets, the first mounting bracket residing at a height that is above the second mounting bracket, wherein the first mounting bracket is configured to receive the packing arm therethrough so that the packing arm is able to rest against and pivot as the packing arm moves through its cycle, and wherein the second mounting bracket is configured to receive the carrier member and hold it in a substantially horizontal orientation.

15. (Currently Amended) A packing mechanism according to Claim 14, wherein the platform includes a drive track that extends in a longitudinal direction, and wherein the second mounting bracket is attached to said drive track so that, in operation, the carrier member moves in a direction that is defined by the drive track to allow the packing arm to contact longitudinally spaced apart regions of the carrier member arm as the packing arm travels through a plurality of cycles.

16. (New) A packing mechanism according to Claim 1, wherein the contact member fingers extend downward in a generally vertical orientation and are spaced apart a distance

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sufficient to define a gap space that is sized and configured to straddle the carrier member and receive at least an upper portion of the carrier member therein.

17. (New) A packing apparatus for arranging suspended elongated product on a carrier member, comprising:

an elongated packing arm having an associated length and opposing first and second end portions, said first end portion comprising a contact member;

an elongate carrier member comprising at least one suspended elongate product held thereon disposed under and cooperably aligned with the packing arm, the carrier member configured to move generally horizontally, wherein, in operation, the contact member is adapted to push and/or pull the elongate product in a predetermined direction to cause adjacent suspended portions of the at least one elongated item to move closer together on the carrier member; and

a drive mechanism attached to the second end portion of the packing arm and configured to repeatedly move the packing arm in a predetermined motion so that the contact member serially moves in a cycle that includes moving in a first longitudinal direction, descending a desired vertical distance sufficient to engage the carrier member, moving in a second longitudinal direction opposite the first longitudinal direction with the contact member substantially horizontal and parallel to the orientation of the carrier member, then rising a distance to reside above the carrier member.

18. (New) A packing apparatus according to Claim 17, wherein the contact member comprises horizontally spaced apart downwardly extending first and second fingers, and wherein, in operation, the fingers periodically straddle the carrier member and contact a portion of the suspended product while moving in a predetermined direction to thereby push and/or pull suspended portions of the elongate product closer together on the carrier member.

19. (New) A packing apparatus according to Claim 17, wherein the drive mechanism is configured to cause the arm to stall for an interval of time between the rearward and forward travel.

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20. (New) A packing apparatus according to Claim 17, wherein the elongate product is a food product, wherein the carrier member is a rod that has a length that is at least about six feet, and wherein the packing arm pushes suspended portions of the elongated item closer together using generally horizontal longitudinal stroke.